MODHERA

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MODHERA

By
Kirit Mankodi

First Edition

प्रत्नकीर्त्तिमपावृणु

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CONTENTS

		Page
1.	General Information	1
2.	Introduction	3
	I. The *Solānkis* and their Monuments	3
3.	The Temple Complex	4
	I. The Main Temple	4
	II. Sculptures on the Main Temple	6
	A. Sculptures on the Outer Walls	6
	B. The Twelve *Ādityas*	7
	C. The Twelve *Gaurīs*	7
	D. The Dikpālas and Other Figures	9
	E. Sculptures Inside the Temple	11
	F. The *Raṅga-maṇḍapa*	12
	III. The *Kuṇḍa*	12
	IV. The *Toraṇa*	13
	V. Who was the Deity of the Temple?	13
	VI. The Small *Śiva* Temple	14
Glossary		15
Select Bibliography		16

LIST OF PLATES

I. Modhera Temple: general view from south-east

II. Plan

III. Chart showing positions of the *Ādityas* and *Gaurīs*

IV. Shrine wall, north side

V. Temple from south-east

VI. Two *Gaurīs*

VII. *Gaurī*

VIII. *Dikpāla* Indra

IX. *Dikpāla* Agni

X. *Dikpāla* Nirrti

XI. *Dikpāla* Varuna

XII. *Dikpāla* Vāyu

XIII. *Śiva* as *Tripada Bhairava* with three heads, three arms and three legs

XIV. Dancing hall *Raṇga-maṇḍapa*

XV. Arch in the *Raṇga-maṇḍapa*

XVI. Pillar in the *Raṇga-mandapa*

XVII. *Kuṇḍa* partial view

XVIII. *Kuṇḍa* or sacred tank, side view

XIX. A shrine in the *kuṇḍa*

XX. Free-standing *Toraṇa*

MODHERA

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

MODHERA IS SITUATED SEVENTY-FIVE KILOMETRES TO THE North-west of Ahmedabad and thirty-five kilometres from Mehsana in northern Gujarat, on the left bank of the *Pushmavati* River. The site is well connected with the rest of Gujarat by a network of excellent roads. Direct State Transport buses, private buses and taxis run from Ahmedabad to Modhera. Conducted tours are also operated. Though Modhera is not on any railway network, but Mehsana is an important railhead. The old *Solānki* capital of *Anhilwād Pātān* is situated forty kilometres to the north of Modhera. This is an ancient township, referred to in the *Purānas* as *Dhamaranya.* For air travellers, Ahmedabad is a convenient option to reach Modhera.

The Sun Temple, built in the early eleventh century or about nine hundred years ago by the *Solānki* king *Bhimadeva* I (AD 1016-27) is one of the remarkable gems of temple architecture in the country and the pride of Gujarat. It has been designed to allow the first rays of the sun to fall on the image of *Surya*, the Sun god, at the time of the equinoxes. Though partially ruined, the temple retains much of its earlier glory. Standing high on a plinth overlooking a deep tank, the Sun temple displays an amazing profusion of magnificently carved gods and goddesses, flowers and leaves, birds and animals, on both its interior and exterior.

The main complex at the site is under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India. Just outside the complex is a small stepped-well, which is being maintained by the Directorate of Archaeology, Govt. of Gujarat.

Every year a dance festival helds here in the month of January to honour the Sun god. During this festive occasion, the temple is illuminated at night with high quality sound systems and excellent lighting, providing an ideal setting for the visitors to enjoy the dance.

The Temple complex opens daily for the visitors from sunrise to sunset. There are rules available with local officers for shooting/filming at the monument and taking photographs. The photographs of the monuments are also available for sale at office of the Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, Janpath, New Delhi-110011 and at the office of the Superintending Archaeologist, Archaeological Survey of India, Vadodara Circle, Vadodara (Gujarat). Entry fee for the site is Rs. 5/- for Indians and Rs. 100/- for foreigners respectively. No entry fee is charged from children below 15 years of age.

2. INTRODUCTION

The Solankis and their Monuments

ARCHITECTURE AND SCULPTURES DEVELOPED GREATLY IN Gujarat since early times. Many dynasties, such as the *Chāvdas, Solānkis, Vāghelās,* as well as wealthy *Jaina* merchants founded innumerable temples, lakes and stepped-wells and embellished them with sculptures through the centuries. Due to this patronage a distinct style of architecture developed in Gujarat.

Among the hundreds of small and large temples of Gujarat, built by the *Solānkis*, also known as *Chāulukyas*, are more prominent than others. The first king of the *Solānkīs, Mularājā* (AD 942-997), defeated the *Chāvdas* and founded his kingdom in Anāhilapāṭaka, modern *Pātān* in North Gujarat. Mularājā's descendants *Chāmundarājā, Durlabharājā, Bhimadeva* I (AD 1024-1066), Karṇadeva (AD 1066-1094), *Siddharājā Jayasiṃha* (AD 1094-1144) and *Kūmārapāla* built *Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Sāura, Śākta, Jaina* temples, monasteries and also excavated large reservoirs. The most famous among them is the temple at *Modhera*, built by *Bhimadeva* I. Others important architectures includes *Rāni* ki Vāv, *Sahasralinga* ("thousand lingas") reservoir at *Pātān*, *Rudramahālaya* at Sidhpur and the Śiva temple at *Somnāth* on the west coast. Apart from these *Solānkis* also built many other monuments, but only few of them are survived.

3. THE TEMPLE COMPLEX

MODHERA IS AN EXTENSIVE COMPLEX WITH THE MAIN Temple at the centre, surrounded by other structures which were built at different times. These are: a free-standing dancing hall, an ornamental gateway, a large masonry tank, a temple to the northern side of the main temple and some other minor structures.

I. THE MAIN TEMPLE

The imposing main temple is the centre of the whole complex. The east facing temple (9m × 11.5m square), is built of bright yellow sandstone. It has two major parts - a closed hall *(gūḍha maṇḍapa)* in the front and a shrine *(garbhagṛha)* behind, both connected by a narrow passage (Pls. I-II). The hall and the shrine are square but when placed together on one axis they create a rectangular plan.

Modhera is one of the most evolved temples of western India, i.e. Gujarat and Rajasthan. Although its entire superstructure *(Śikhara)* has been destroyed, it enables us to visualize the fully developed form of a North Indian temple.

The visitor to the site first encounters the *kuṇḍa* then the dancing hall and lastly the main structure. We will take up the temple first as it is the nucleus of the whole complex.

The whole structure is raised on a high platform *(pīṭha),* above which is the main wall *(maṇḍovarā)*, consisting of two parts known as *vedī-bandha* and *jaṇghā*. The *pīṭha* or socle is decorated with rows of elephants, men and warriors in various heroic actions, processions, etc. The wall above this basement, known as *vedī-bandha*, has a profile with shapely mouldings. The wall section

above the *vedī-bandha* is the principal repository of sculptures. It is adorned with large panels, following an orderly progression. The projected entrance is standing on an elaborately decorated pair of columns which gives access to the doorway. It is now greatly damaged.

The halls of western Indian temples are of two types, either closed in by surrounding walls (*gūḍha-maṇḍapa*) or with half walls around their peripheries, with a gap between the upper part and the roof above *(raṇga maṇḍapa)*. The hall of Modhera represents first category. In its centre eight decorated columns make up an octagon. The inner walls of the hall are adorned with figures of the twelve *Ādityas*, who are forms of the Sun god, actually represents the twelve months of one solar year.

The pillars at Modhera are also of two types - the pillars in the octagon at the centre of the closed hall are octagonal at the base, progressing to a circular shape. They are relieved with figures of *apsarās* and many other figures. These pillars create a very pleasing effect because of their shape and the profusion of carvings on them. The another type of pillars are short, entirely square and crowned by the motif of the full vase.

The hall leads to a dark shrine chamber, which is provided with a circumambulatory passage around the shrine. The doorway is elaborately carved with divine and decorative figures - the *Ādityas* or the other aspects of the Sun god, *Gaṇeśa, Kubera, apsarās* and many others.

There are two doorways, the main doorway leads to the hall and the other gives access to the sanctum. Both are damaged but the hall-doorway is slightly better preserved. *Gaṇeśa* and *Kubera* are on the either side at the base, above which there are guardian deity typical to *Sūrya*, *Dandī* holding a long staff and *Piṇgalā* holding an inkpot and pen. Doorframes are divided into three parts. The

central face contains images of the Sun god, blended with *Brahmā, Vishṇu* and *Śiva*. The prominent central block on the lintel depicts the three supreme gods of Hinduism - *Brahmā, Vishṇu* and *Śiva* with the *Ādityas* interspersed between them.

The sanctum's doorway is comparatively more damaged than the hall's door. It's decoration is similar in which *Gaṇeśa, Kubera, apsarās*, etc. are discernible.

An unusual feature of this temple is that beyond this doorway there is no floor of the shrine. Instead, there is a 4m deep lower chamber, which may represent an earlier phase of the temple. The shrine doorway remains closed in order to prevent anyone from falling into the deep chamber.

II. SCULPTURES ON THE MAIN TEMPLE

A. SCULPTURES ON THE OUTER WALLS: Sculptures on this monument built in the first quarter of the eleventh century are truly marvellous. In particular, the outer walls are adorned with hundreds of figures of various sizes. Sculptures are the principal reason, why Modhera is famous all over the world, attracting thousands of visitors.

Of course, the walls, from the base to the top, are decorated with small and large carvings. Between the hall and the shrine, these walls are adorned with thirty-four large panels. On each panel, a central divine figure is surrounded by four smaller figures at four corners.

These thirty-four panels can be divided into three groups based on the deities represented. The first group represents twelve *Ādityas*, in the second group are twelve goddesses (*Gaurīs*), and the third group consists of ten figures, eight of whom are *Dikpālās* or "protectors of directions of space" and the remaining two are other related deities.

The walls of the shrine and the hall are so designed that on each of these two components, twelve positions for image panels are created for the twelve *Ādityas* and the twelve *Gaurīs* (PI.III).

B. THE TWELVE *ĀDITYAS*: The *Ādityas* are aspects of the Sun god. The Sun god along with his twelve manifestations (corresponding to the cycle of twelve months in a year) have been worshipped since the Vedic times. As they are forms of the Sun god their appearance is identical to him. On the walls of Modhera, the *Ādityas* are placed on twelve large panels on the shrine walls (PI.IV). They are standing frontally and each has two arms with lotuses in the upraised hands; they wear a coat of arms, tall boots and a special waist cord known as *avyaṇga*. They are flanked by the same two attendants who flank the Sun god, namely *Dandī* and *Piṇgalā;* and they ride a seven-horse chariot like the Sun. The twelve *Ādityas* on the inner walls of the hall have the same iconography.

C. THE TWELVE GAURĪS: The plan of the structure is such that twelve positions are created on walls of both the shrine and hall. These twelve positions are occupied by twelve panels of goddesses or *Devīs*. They are four-armed and stand in graceful postures. Like the *Ādityas*, who form one unified group, the goddesses also form one group because they have certain common features. They all stand in graceful postures and bear pitchers of water and rosaries in their lower pairs of hand but the attributes in their hands are different.

Just as there are seven mother goddesses, nine planets etc. in Hindu pantheon, there are twelve *Gaurīs*, known as *Dvādasa gaurīs*. They are aspects of *Gaurī*, *Śiva*'s wife. Their images are known from many parts of northern and western India and also

from religious texts. Since the penance of *Gaurī* or *Pārvati* is the principal theme in the stories of *Śiva* and Pārvati, these *Gaurīs* are often portrayed in an ascetic form, with matted hair, rosary in hand, etc.

The myth of *Gaurī* is as follows: in her former life as *Satī*, the daughter of *Daksha*, she married the wandering of ascetic god *Śiva* against her father's wish and was rejected by her father. Once, when *Daksha* performed a great sacrifice she attended it uninvited. On being insulted, she threw herself into the sacrificial fire. She was reborn as a daughter of Himalaya, the king of the mountains, performed austerities and was finally reunited with *Śiva*. At Modhera, the forms of these twelve goddesses are depicted in the following manner. We begin from the south-east of the hall and proceed clockwise around the *maṇḍapa* (Pl.V).

1. The first goddess has the rosary (*akṣamāla*) in one hand and gesture of blessing or *varad mūdrā* (in this case known as *varadakṣa mudra*), the figure shows that these two emblem are in two hands.

2. The second goddess is in *varad mūdrā* and a rosary in her lower hand while the other hands are having a trident and a bell.

3. She has a staff and a pitcher.

4. Both the natural hand are broken; the upper hands hold a lotus bud and an open lotus flower respectively.

5. The figure is totally destroyed.

6. The two right hands and the two left hands of the goddess are broken but the lotus in the upper hand is intact. Her hair is matted like an ascetic's. Her bull mount is at her feet. See Pl.VI for Gaurīs 6 and 7.

7. The natural right hand is broken, the other hands hold elephant goad or a staff, a noose and a pitcher respectively.
8. Her three hands have thunderbolt, banner and pitcher while one hand is in *varadakṣ mūdrā*.
9. The natural right hand of the figure held in the blessing gesture and the left hand has a pitcher. The upper right hand originally held an attribute such as a staff or trident but now only its shaft survives.
10. One of the three surviving hands is in *varadakṣ mūdrā*, while others have a trident and a snake. Hair is matted (Pl. VII)
11. Only one upper hand has survived, in which she holds an attribute known as the *khatvāṇga* (a human skull mounted on a long bone).
12. Almost completely destroyed.

D. THE *DIKPĀLAS* AND OTHER FIGURES: The twelve *Ādityas* are placed on the sanctum walls and the twelve *Gaurīs* on the walls of the hall. Around the entire structure there are eight *Dikpālas* or regents of the directions of space and two other deities or semi-divine beings.

The *Dikpālas* in Hinduism are guardian gods presiding over the directions of space, comprising the four main directions east, west, north and south and the four intermediate directions (north-east, south-east, south-west and north-west). These eight gods are believed to preside over these respective directions and protect the entire universe. The eight *Dikpālas* are as follows: East: *Iṇdra*; South-east: *Agni*; South: *Yama*; West: *Varuṇa*; South-west: *Nirṛti*; North: *Kubera*; North-west: *Vāyū*; and North-east: *Isān*.

The *Dikpālas* on the Modhera temple are all in standing postures with four-armed, wear ornaments and display other attributes:

1. *Iṇdra*: His figure is in the south-eastern corner of the hall, facing the east. Three of his four hands are destroyed and attributes have not survived. The elephant mount at his feet is the only feature which points to an association with Indra, but the identification of the next personage is by no means certain (Pl.VIII). The identification of this *Dikpāla* is also problematic. He is placed in the south-eastern corner of the hall, facing the south. His upper right hand holds something that looks like a thunderbolt (one of the attributes of Indra), and his other upper hand has, what looks like an elephant goad. An elephant is repeated here as well. Both these sculptures are enigmatic.

2. *Agni* is on the wall of passage between hall and the shrine, facing the south (Pl.IX). He is somewhat stout, as befits a sedentary, priestly personage. His hair is matted, he has beard and moustache; flames of fire issue from his head as Agni is the god of sacrificial fire. Both the right hands are broken. He seems to be holding a skull cup in the upper left hand, which indicates a *Tantric* influence. A ram-like animal is at his feet.

3. *Yama* is in the south-west, facing the south. All his four arms are destroyed. Yama's buffalo mount, is not represented here.

4. *Nirṛit*, naked, is in the south-western corner, facing the west (Pl.X). Only the two natural hands survive; in the right is preserved the handle of a sword, *Nirṛti's* usual attribute. His ornaments are made of bones and snakes; his mount, a naked corpse is at his feet.

5. *Varuṇa* (Pl.XI) is in the north-west, facing the west. He has lost all four arms but his characteristic attribute - the noose, has been preserved.

6. *Vāyū* is in the north-west, facing the north. His lower right hand has the blessing/rosary; the upper left hand has a lotus; his mount, the antelope, is at his feet (Pl.XII).

7. *Kubera* is in the intermediate space between the hall and the shrine (like Agni). He has a corpulent figure. All his hands have been destroyed but some objects like a lotus, a conch shell and a mace seem to have been preserved.

8. *Isān*, an aspect of god *Śiva*, is in the north-eastern corner, facing the east. His lower right hand has the blessing/rosary; His lower right hand is in *varad mūdrā* along with a rosary. He also had a trident, traces of which remain. *Śiva*'s bull mount is at his feet.

As we walk around the entire temple and arrive again at the façade, we confront a very rare figure in the north-east, facing the east. The god has three hands, three arms and three legs. There are two right arms and two left legs. The right hands might have a sword and a dagger and the solitary left hand bears a skull cup. Of the three faces, the two side faces are peaceful but the central face may have been fierce but it is much worn-out (Pl.XIII). This form of *Śiva* is known as *Trīpada Bhairava*, "*Śiva Bhairava* with three legs", or *Atīrīktānga Bhairava*, "*Śiva Bhairava* with the surplus limb" and is rarely encountered.

E. SCULPTURES INSIDE THE TEMPLE: In comparison with the outer walls, the inside is less ornamented, which is a characteristic of Indian temples. The niches in the hall and the shrine as well as doorways and pillars have carvings. The twelve *Ādityas* are depicted on the walls of the hall and the shrine; in most respects they are like those on the outer walls.

F. THE DANCING HALL *(RAṆGA-MAṆḌAPA):* In front of the main temple is an open pillared hall, known as *raṇga-maṇḍapa* (Pl.XIV). This must have been the place for religious congregation, singing and dancing. Its form is strikingly different from that of the closed hall of the main shrine. It is roughly octagonal with only a half wall, on which are raised pillars supporting the roof. The damaged roof was originally in the form of a stepped pyramid, the outline of these steps can be viewed in its profile now.

The domical ceiling is supported by a central octagon of very tall, slender pillars and by other half pillars resting on the rim of the wall. The pillars of the central part are divided horizontally and vertically by bands of figures. These multitudes of figures - *apsarās*, couples, warriors, divinities etc., scenes from mythology and creepers - create a very lively effect (Pl.XV). The pillars were originally spanned by undulating arches typical of western India, though, now only a few are in place (Pl.XVI). The outer surface of the short wall of this open hall is covered with decorative motifs. Overall, this hall is a very attractive structure, airy and bright.

There is evidence that this hall was an after thought; it was not built at the same time as the main temple and the tank between which it stands. Its mouldings are more developed; it is compressed a little, as though the builder has compromised perfect geometry in order to accommodate the *raṇga-maṇḍapa* within the available space.

III. *THE KUṆḌA*

The *raṅga-maṇḍapa* is fronted by a deep rectangular *kuṇḍa* fed by sub-soil water of the Pushmāavati River nearby (Pls.XVII-XVIII). Its design is aesthetically pleasing: the entire descent is divided into four main terraces with tiered steps in the form of

truncated pyramids introduced at regular intervals. Miniature niches are attached to the terrace walls. In the centre of the eastern, southern and northern walls are shrines (complete from base to finial) with images on their outer walls (Pl.XIX). In the centre of the western side is a stairway leading up to the free-standing ornamental gateway *(toraṇa)* and then on to the eastern face of the *raṇga-maṇḍapa*. The miniature shrine-niches had figures of deities from the Hindu pantheon including gods associated with water (Vishṇu sleeping on the mythical serpent *Śeṣanāga; Chandra* the moon god) but they have been badly weathered.

IV. *THE TORAṆA*

Between the *kuṇḍa* and the *raṇga-maṇḍapa*, there is an imposing ceremonial free-standing gates (*toraṇas)*. Such free-standing "gates" were often erected in front of temples in western India (Pl.XX). Their design consists of two tall columns divided into many horizontal and vertical bands decorated with ornate figures, scrolls, animals etc. and spanned by ornate beams and other architectural members. Here at Modhera, the *toraṇa* has been partially preserved.

There were two more such gateways at Modhera but they are in an even more ruined condition.

V. WHO WAS THE DEITY OF THE TEMPLE?

Modhera was first described by the British archaeologists James Burgess and Henry Cousens in the early twentieth century. From the presence of the twelve *Ādityas* on the shrine's outer walls and elsewhere, it has always been believed that the temple was dedicated to Sūrya, the Sun god.

In ancient Indian art, the Sun god was sometimes combined with *Śiva* and both were represented together in one image. Therefore, it has recently been pointed out that since at the Modhera temple, the twelve forms of *Śiva*'s consort (twelve *Gaurīs*) are given equal importance as the twelve *Ādityas*. The central block on the doorway depicts *Śiva* and there is a prominent image of *Trīpada Bhairava*, it is possible to view the Modhera temple as being dedicated to both *Sūrya* and *Śiva*.

VI. THE SMALL ŚIVA TEMPLE

In addition to the main complex comprising the *kuṇḍa*, *toraṇa*, *raṇga-maṇḍapa* and the main shrine, there is also a small *Śiva* shrine on the north side of the main temple. It is a rather plain structure without the sculptural wealth of the structures discussed above.

GLOSSARY

Akṣamālā	:	rosary of sacred rudraksha beads
Apsarā	:	celestial female figure that inhabits the sky; "wives" of the gandharvas and often depicted dancing or making music
Avyaṇga	:	Sun god's belt (Iranian origin)
Devī	:	goddess
Dikpālas	:	gods as guardians of the directions of space
Garbhagṛha	:	inner chamber of a temple
Gūḍha-maṇḍapa	:	closed hall
Jaṇghā	:	wall (of a temple)
Khaṭvāṇga	:	human bone capped by a skull
Kuṇḍa	:	cistern
Pīṭha	:	base
Purṇa-kalaśa	:	full-vase motif in art
Raṇga-maṇḍapa	:	hall for dancing and ceremonial functions in a temple
Śikhara	:	spire (of a temple)
Tāntric	:	esoteric religious practice
Toraṇa	:	free-standing ceremonial gateway
Varadaksha-mudrā	:	gesture of blessing with akshamala (rosary) in hand
Varada-mudrā	:	gesture of blessing
Vedī-bandha	:	podium (of a temple)

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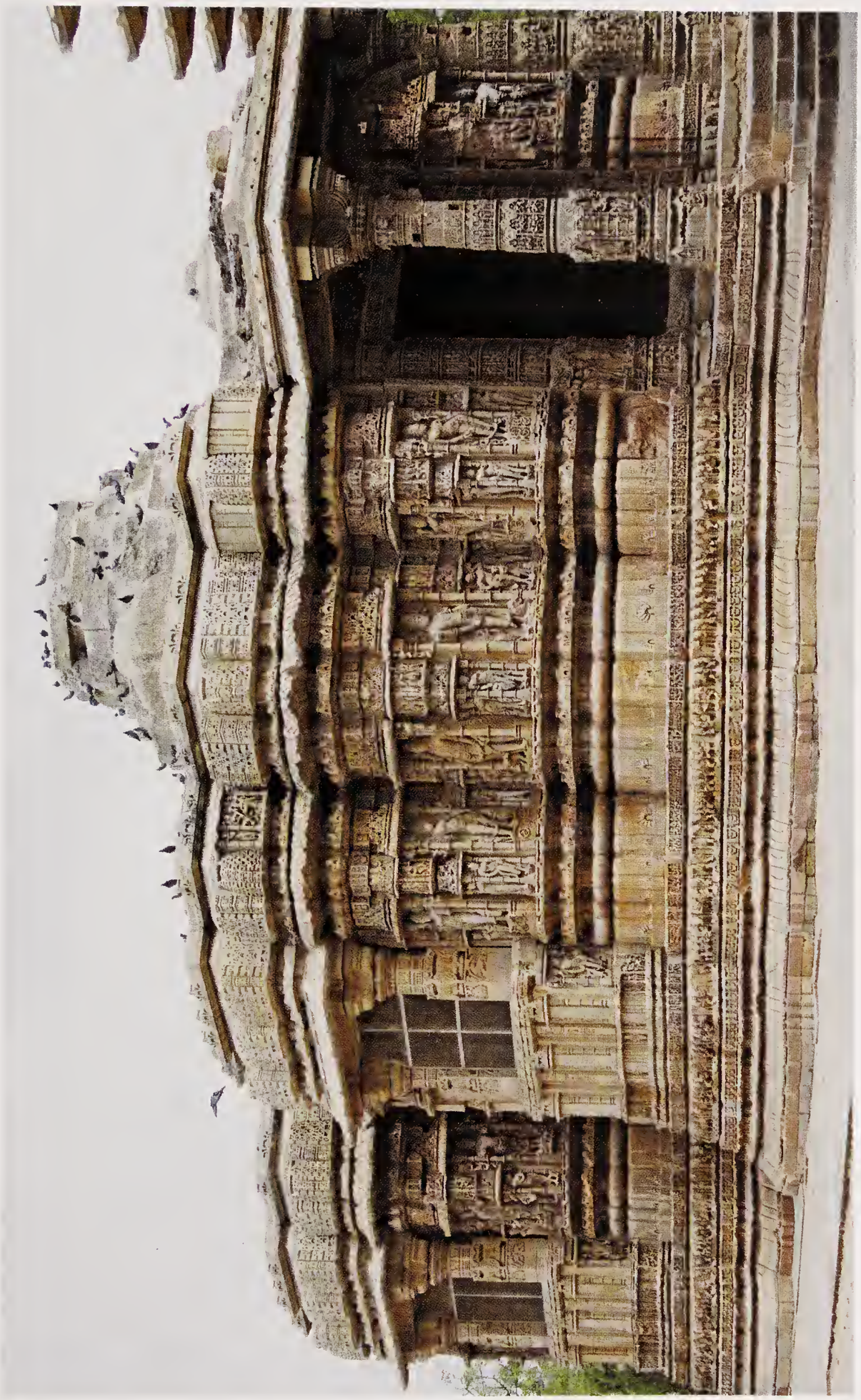
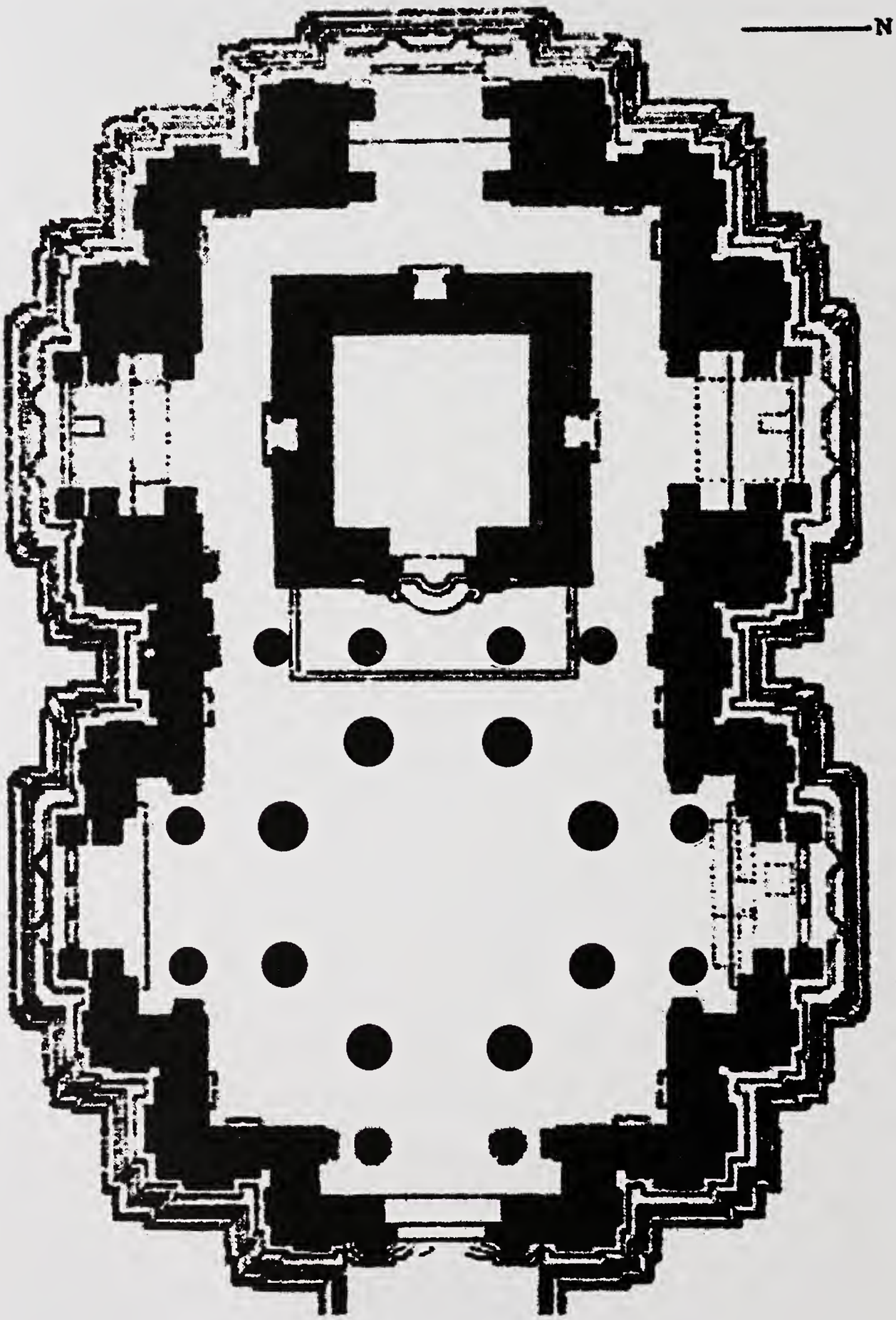
PLATE - I



Modhera temple : general view from south - east. See page 4

PLATE - II



Plan of the main temple. See page 4

PLATE - III

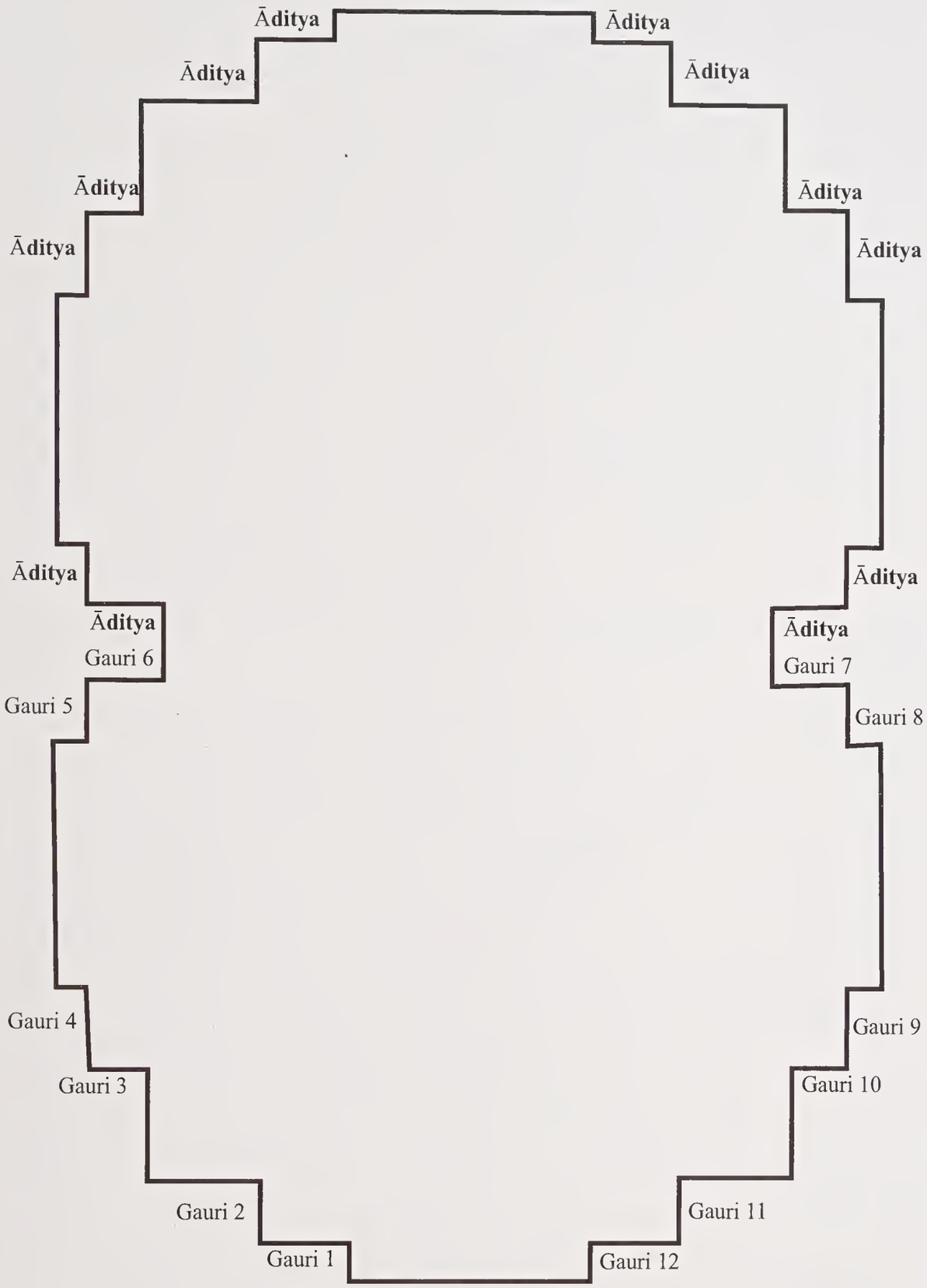


Chart Showing Positions of the twelve Ādityas and twelve Gaurīs. *See page 7*

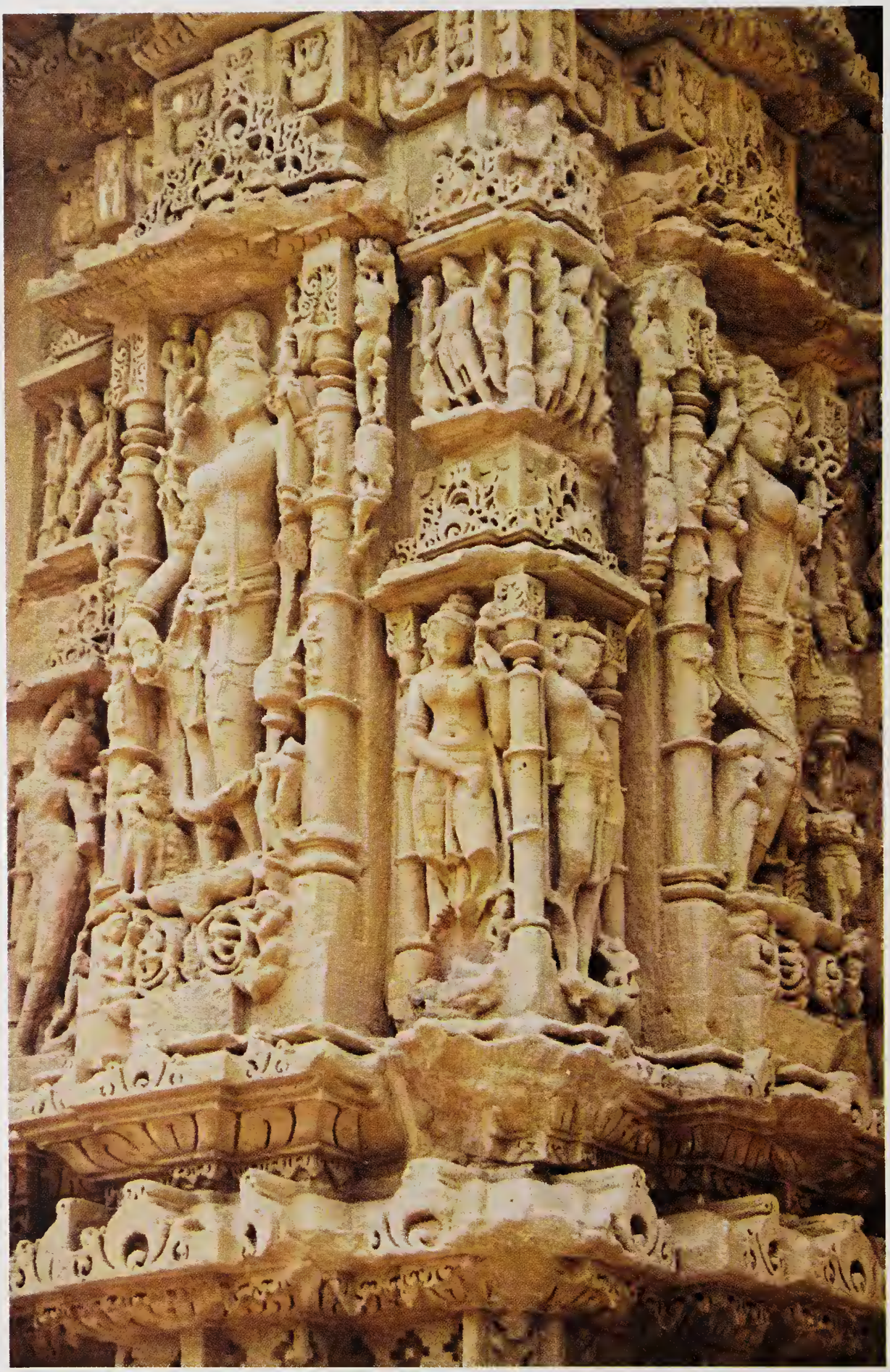
PLATE - IV

Shrine wall, north side. See page 6

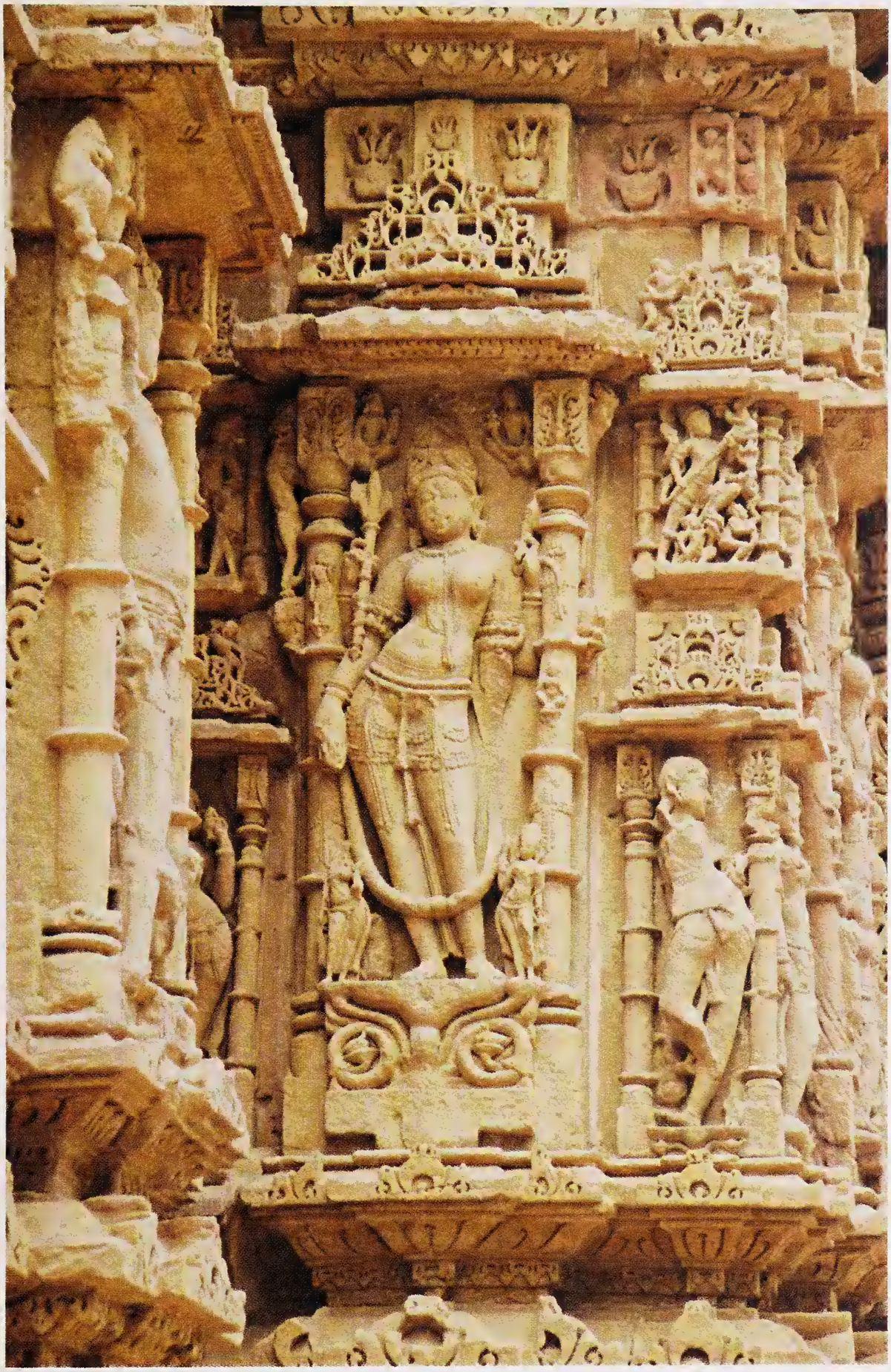
PLATE - V

Temple from south - east. See page 8

PLATE - VI

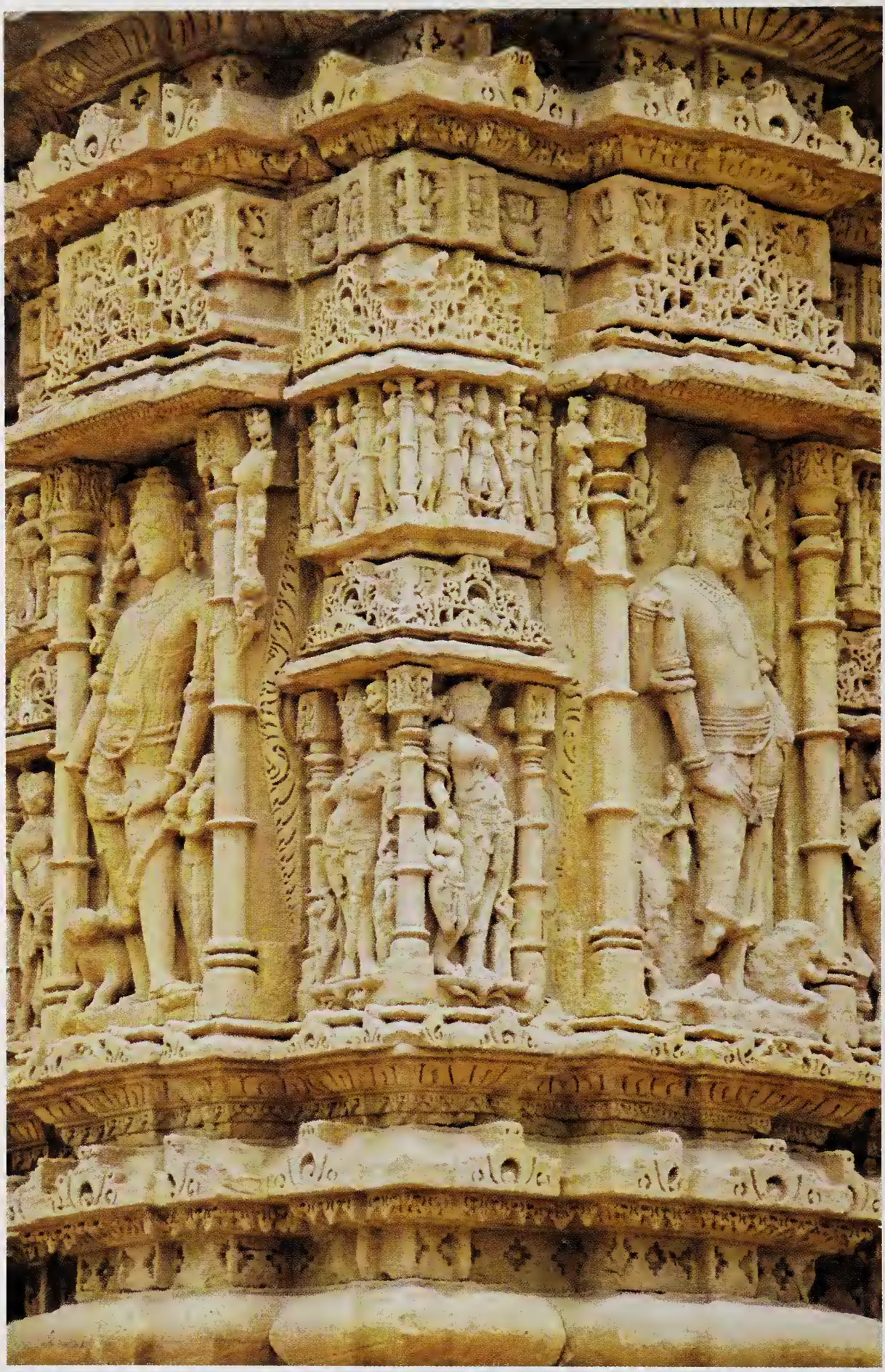


Two Gaurīs. See page 8



Gaurīs. See page 9

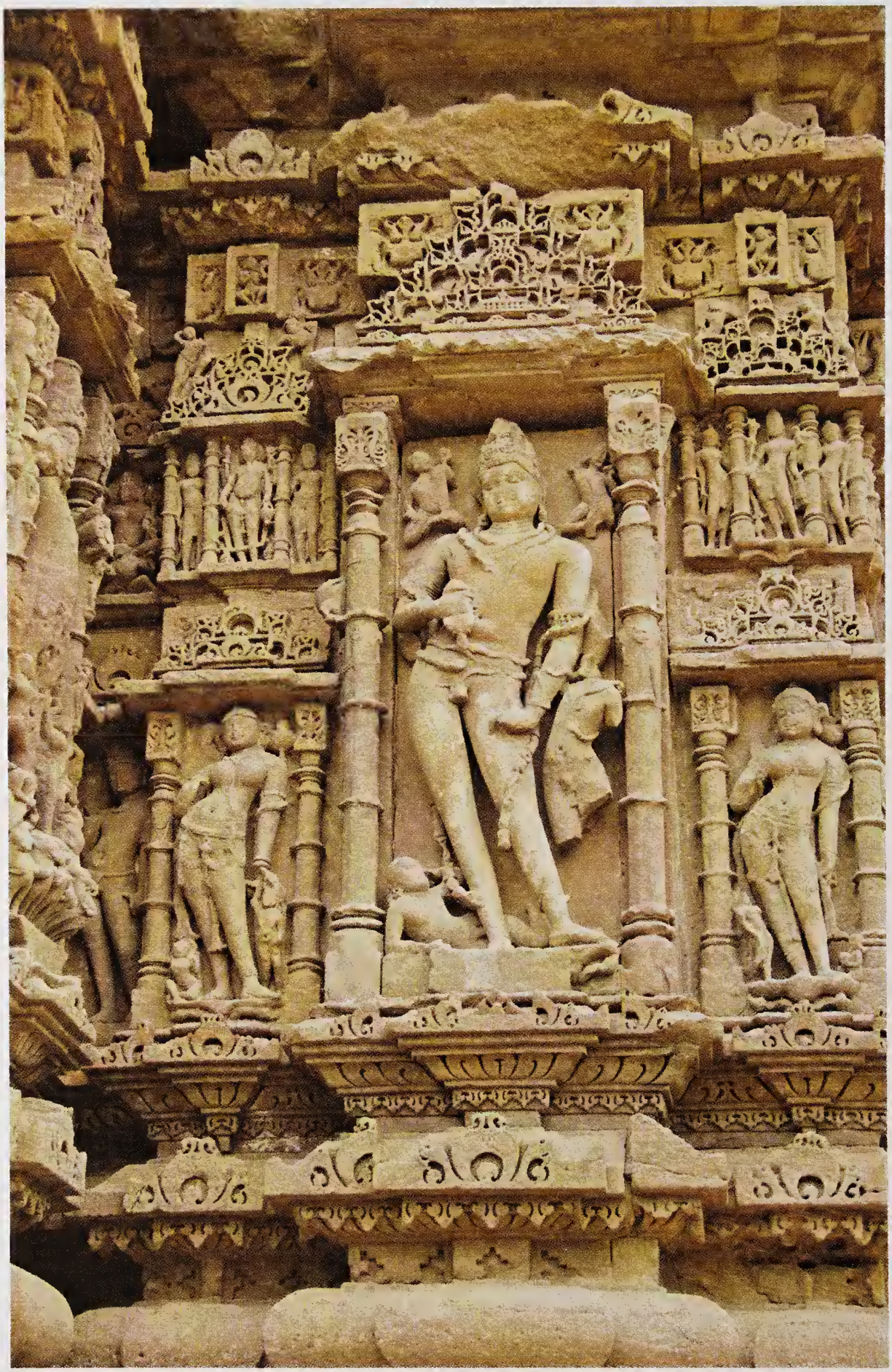
PLATE - VIII



Indra. See page 10

Agni. See page 10

PLATE - X



Nirṛti. See page 10

PLATE - XI

Varuṇa. *See page 10*

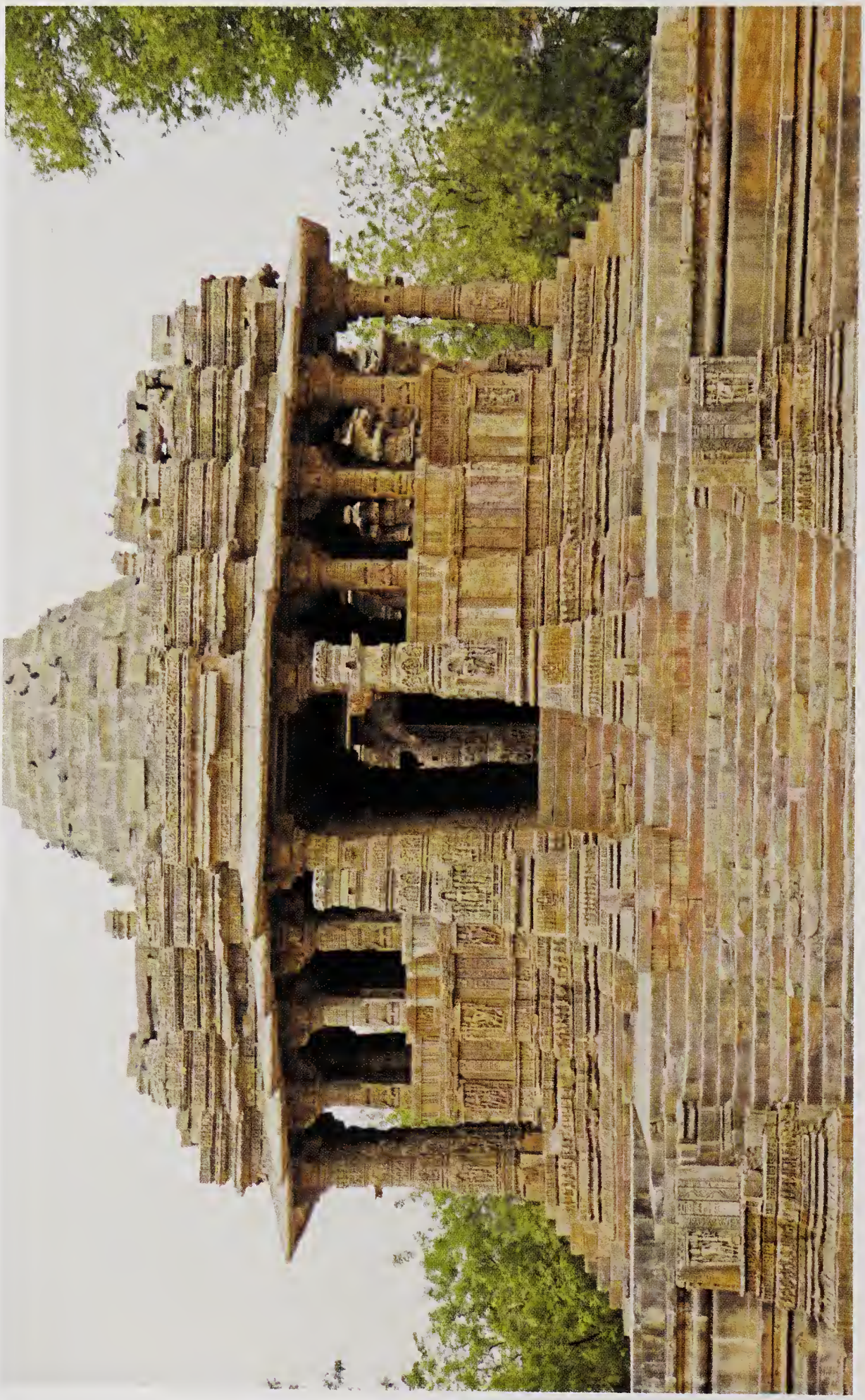
PLATE - XII

Vayū. *See page 11*

PLATE - XIII

Śiva as Tripada Bhairava with three heads, three arms and three legs. *See page 11*

PLATE - XIV



Dancing hall (raṅga-maṇḍapa). See page 12

PLATE - XV

Arch in the dancing hall or raṇga-maṇḍapa. *See page 12*

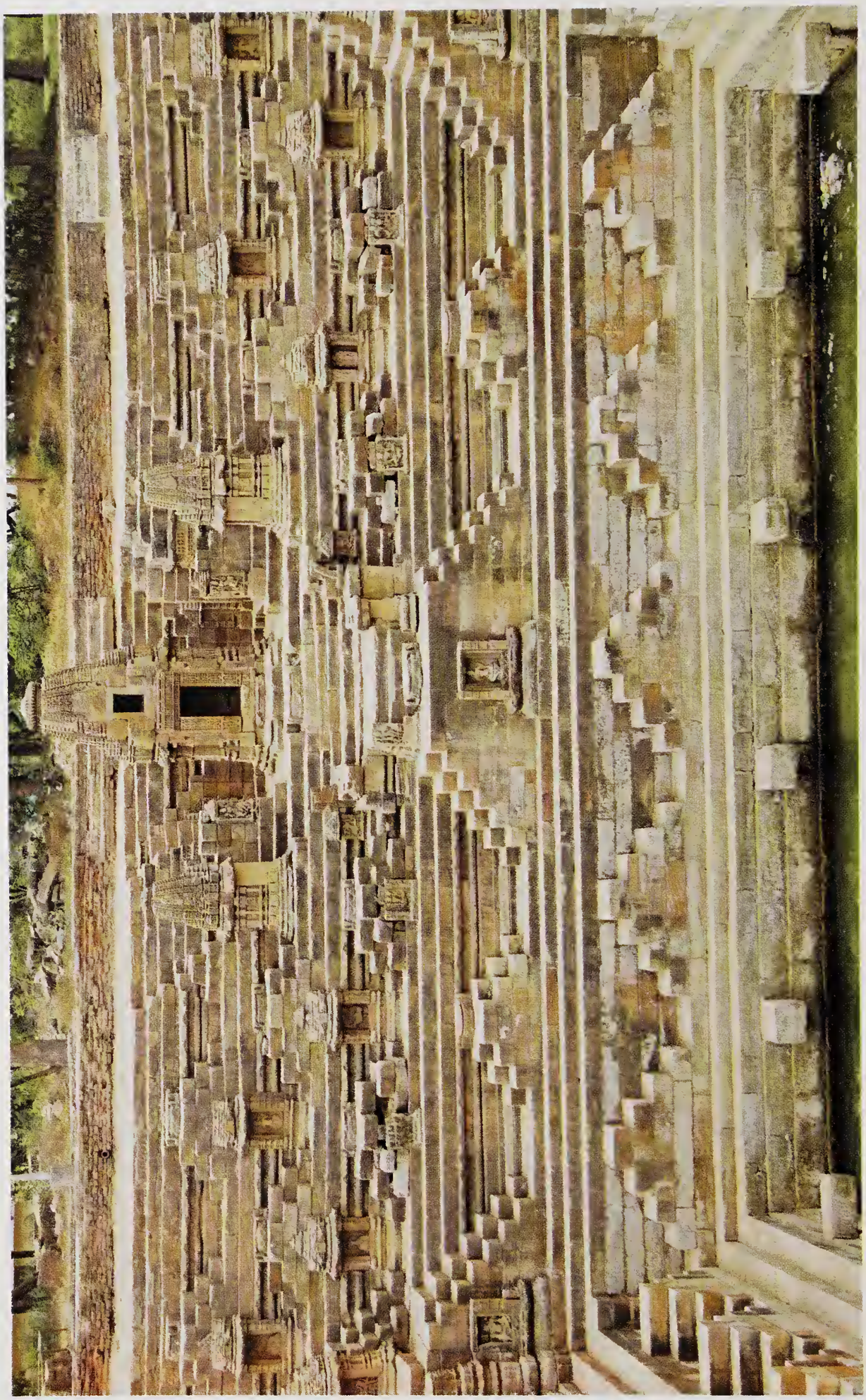
PLATE - XVI

Pillars in the raṇga-maṇḍapa. *See page 12*

PLATE - XVII

Kuṇḍa: partial view. *See page 12*

PLATE - XVIII



Kuṇḍa or sacred tank, side view. *See page 12*

PLATE - XIX

A shrine in the Kuṇḍa. *See page 13*

PLATE - XX

Free-standing toraṇa or ceremonial gate. *See page 13*

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA